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ABSTRACT

A Braille Reader Survey Analysis was prepared for the Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress in 1974 in order to determine what kinds of books and magazines current braille readers like to read, and to obtain information about braille readers. The survey mailing list was gleaned from subscription lists of four braille publications: "Braille Book Review," "The Braille Monitor," "The Braille Forum," and "The New Outlook for the Blind." Forty percent of the 1,735 people surveyed responded. Eight recommendations resulted from the survey: (1) the number of braille books and magazines should be maintained or increased; (2) the most favored book categories were entertainment, general information, hobbies, and education, while preferred magazines were in the general interest, news, and entertainment categories; (3) these preferences should be honored in press braille title selection; (4) longer books should be available; (5) "Braille Book Review" should list more titles; (6) "Braille Book Review" should list available braille magazines; (7) the quality of the braille services of libraries and centers must be evaluated; (8) a followup survey needs to be taken in two years. (KC)

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REPORT ON BRAILLE READER SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

This report is an interpretation of the findings of the Braille Reader Survey Analysis prepared for the Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (DBPH) in 1974 by Government Studies and Systems (GSS) of Philadelphia, Pa. Copies of the GSS analysis were circulated to section and unit heads in the division and also to the network libraries. Comments were sought and received, and taken into consideration in this report.*

The purposes of the study were to learn what kinds of books and magazines current braille readers like to read and to obtain current information about the characteristics of these braille readers. A total of 1,735 braille-and-print questionnaires were sent out, and 624 were received and tabulated; an additional 60-plus were

*Print or braille copies of the full report by Government Studies and Systems may be obtained by writing to Richard H. Evensen, Program Analyst, Division for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. 20542

IR001 413

not tabulated because they were received after the cutoff date. In all, therefore, there was a 40 percent return of the questionnaires, a good return and, in fact, the percentage indicated by GSS at the beginning of the study as the level needed for making meaningful interpretations. The total sample was drawn from the four mailing lists described briefly below:

a. Braille Book Review is the bimonthly publication of DBPH that contains annotated lists of new braille (and recorded) books available either from regional libraries or, in the case of handcopied books, from a few public or private libraries. There were 1,176 names selected from the magazine's mailing list; 405 readers on this list responded.

b. The Braille Monitor is the monthly publication of the National Federation of the Blind; most of the members of this large national organization are blind. The 236 names selected were from the mailing list for the braille edition of the magazine; 79 readers responded.

c. The Braille Forum is the bimonthly publication of the American Council of the Blind, a national organization most of whose members are blind. From the mailing list of

of the braille edition 168 names were selected, and 59 readers responded.

d. The New Outlook for the Blind, published September through June, is a journal directed to professional persons in the field of work for the blind. Of the 155 selected from the mailing list for the braille edition, 79 responded.

The sampling procedure for the first three magazines was to select every tenth name on the mailing list. Because the New Outlook mailing list is much smaller than the others, one of every two names was selected. GSS' consulting statistician recommended these procedures to assure statistical validity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The present number of braille books and braille magazines produced should be maintained, possibly increased if readership interest holds.

2. The selection staff of DBPH should give due consideration to the clear category preferences expressed by readers, especially entertainment, general information, hobbies, and education among books; and general interest, news and public affairs, and entertainment among magazines.

3. Where possible these category emphases should be reflected in press braille title selection or, where this is impractical, adequately compensated for by providing limited copies (but more than one) of handcopied books.

4. Selections for press braille production should include books of varying length and not a preponderance of shorter books as at present.

5. There should be greater effort in disseminating information about available press braille and handcopied titles by including more titles in Braille Book Review and by preparing or stimulating preparation of special book lists and bibliographies; such listings should be annotated.

6. Braille Book Review should include periodically an annotated list of braille magazines available. Consideration should also be given to periodic production, in braille, of an up-to-date reference circular containing such an annotated list.

7. A study should be made of those libraries and centers providing braille service so that DBPH can determine the quality of braille service that is provided, significant

improvements in service needed, and successful library systems and techniques that can be used by libraries and centers to achieve such improvements and maintain quality service.

8. A followup survey of braille readers should be undertaken in two years and be of a scope similar to the present one. This recommendation for a separate survey is made even if DBPH conducts a full-scale survey of all readers to gain a reader profile, general reader preferences, and reader evaluations of library service.

These eight recommendations stem from an analysis and interpretation of the findings contained in the GSS report. This analysis and interpretation follows.

ABILITY TO READ BRAILLE ONLY

It is significant that 28 percent of the total number of respondents answered "yes" to question 1: "Is braille the only reading medium you are able to use?" The variation by source of mailing list is great: from 16 percent for readers of New Outlook for the Blind, to 30 percent of Braille Book Review (BBR) readers, to 36 percent of Braille Monitor readers. There is a strong suggestion that one-quarter to one-third of active braille readers are either

profoundly deaf, or hard-of-hearing or do not wish to use playback equipment. Followup would be necessary to confirm or refute this suggestion. Of course, it is also significant that three-fourths of the total of respondents say they can use other media (presumably recordings), but I believe one should consider the responses to this question in conjunction with those to question 2.

PREFERENCE FOR READING MATERIALS

Fifty-one percent of the total number responding said they do most of their reading in braille. BBR and Braille Forum readers' responses are close to the total responses. The 61 percent for Monitor readers would seem to match with the higher percentage who said they can read braille only. There are two significant additional points to be made about responses in this category. First, 51 percent of New Outlook readers prefer reading in braille despite the very low "yes" response (16 percent) to the question on ability to use braille only. Second, the response to this question was very high--579 out of 624 or 93 percent again, an indication of high reader interest.

PREFERENCE FOR BOOKS OR MAGAZINES

The total number of responses regarding a

comparative preference for books or magazines is also high: 589 or 94 percent. The responses are about evenly divided between a preference for braille books and for braille magazines, but the responses by source vary widely. It seems significant, however, that 46 percent of BBR respondents read mostly books. On the other hand, the readers of the other three magazines contain a significantly smaller percentage (less than 20 percent) who do more reading of books than magazines. Looking at the figures in another way, however, one notes that there is a narrower spread in the response, "half books and half magazines": 26 percent to 40 percent. If these figures were to hold after more exhaustive investigation, it would be logical to conclude that there are significant audiences for both books and magazines. In such an investigation one would also want to ask the question: If there are not many heavy book readers among those who subscribe to magazines other than BBR, what can or should DBPH do to meet their reading needs? This question should be asked since it appears there was very little overlap among the various mailing lists, suggesting that those who subscribe to each magazine do so for very specific reasons.

PREFERENCES FOR AMOUNT AND LENGTH OF MATERIALS

Two questions deal with how much one reads per month, and two more with how long one likes a book or magazine to be. The responses to these four questions show fairly consistent and closely related patterns, thus lending themselves to analysis as a group. The clearest direction of reading habits is toward a middle course: not too much and not too little, not too long and not too short. Forty-five percent of the respondents say they read 2 to 6 book volumes per month, while 51 percent say they read 2 to 6 magazine volumes per month. Thirty-five percent read one book volume or less per month, while for magazines, second place goes to longer periodicals since 23 percent said they read 7 to 15 volumes per month.

A rather surprising number, 44 percent have no strong preference for the length of books, and a truly surprising number, 72 percent marked the same answer for length of magazines. There is an important implication here: that the length of a book or magazine is secondary to other considerations, possibly the type of book or magazine. Second place is split evenly (25 percent each) between those voting for short books and for medium-length books. As for magazines 16 percent voted for short magazines,

and 12 percent for the longer ones. (Some very popular magazines are of a greater length: Playboy, Reader's Digest, National Geographic, Ladies Home Journal, and Horizon.)

Considering responses by source, one finds that BBR readers follow the general pattern in all cases except in the amount of magazine reading, which adds weight to the previously stated inference that BBR readers are stronger than others in favoring books. Specifically, although 53 percent of BBR respondents read 2 to 6 magazine volumes per month, the second largest percentage, 22 percent read one volume or less, rather than the 7 to 15 volumes read by other respondents. In most ways Monitor readers' responses are like those of the total group and of BBR responses. The most significant variation is greater reading of and preference for magazines, again matching the overall response favoring magazines. Forum reader responses show greater divergence, with the clearest indicators being greater preference for and reading of shorter materials, especially magazines. New Outlook readers continue to show a strong preference for reading in general; the widest divergence from the other groups is the large number, 48 percent, who report reading 7 to 15 magazine volumes per month. It appears that they do read quite a few books but usually the shorter ones

(although this inference is suggestive rather than conclusive).

READER USE OF LIBRARIES

In summary to this point: there is a fairly active group of braille readers who show a good mix between reading books and magazines, and for whom the length of a book or magazine is important but not overriding. Since almost all readers must obtain their braille materials by mail from special libraries, the survey included questions on where readers get most of their books and magazines, and what they think about the quality of service from the regional libraries that distribute the Library of Congress materials.

Of the total number responding, 55 percent say they borrow mostly from the regional libraries, and 26 percent borrow about half from this source and about half from other sources--most likely private libraries throughout the United States. GSS suggests that two-thirds or more of all braille books are obtained through regional libraries; further investigation might show this percentage to be too high, for even the 55 percent response is to the question, "mostly from regional libraries?" The overall response is significant, because it suggests an area for improving library service, in that 19 percent of the respondents get their books mostly from sources

other than the regional libraries, and that 26 percent get about half from network libraries and half from other sources.

Looking at the spread among readers of the various magazines involved in the survey, one finds that the greatest use of the regional libraries and the smallest use of other sources are by BBR readers, whereas the readers of the other three magazines use the regional libraries in significantly smaller percentages. The greatest corresponding increase is in the "half-and-half" category (for Forum and New Outlook readers in particular, where better than one-third marked this answer).

GSS' finding that close to three-fourths of the readers are satisfied with the books obtainable from the regional libraries is questionable. The significant figure is that 51 percent of the total (and of BBR readers) say that the service is adequate; 23 percent of the total (24 percent of BBR respondents) say that they get more than they use. In a mail-order situation like the network libraries, getting more than one can use can be almost as annoying as getting too little, and indeed many readers have complained about being deluged with books--and deluged with unwanted books.

The divergence among the other magazine readerships is interesting: 41 percent of Monitor readers find the service adequate and 26 percent find it less than adequate; on the other hand, Forum readers' corresponding percentages are 60 percent and 8 percent; New Outlook readers corresponded to the total and BBR patterns--50 percent and 16 percent, respectively. The responses were 10 to 12 percent on "much less than adequate" except for New Outlook readers where such great dissatisfaction was even smaller--6 percent.

As to readers' satisfaction with braille magazines obtainable from the regional libraries, the percentages indicating that service is adequate were higher than for books--61 percent for the total group and from 60 percent to 66 percent for subgroups. Most other percentages were just as closely grouped. Although it is useful and encouraging to know that so many readers are satisfied with the magazine service they receive, the credit does not redound as completely to the regional libraries as it would for braille books. This is true because many of the magazines are sent to readers on a direct-circulation basis, involving the regional libraries only in placing readers' names on the lists maintained by the braille producers and in sending address changes and cancellations.

BOOK AND MAGAZINE CATEGORY PREFERENCES

The foregoing concerning reader preference for braille; for the kind, amount, and length of braille materials; and the degree of reader satisfaction with available materials are all prefatory to considering the findings regarding readers' book and magazine content preferences. It was impractical to consider specific subjects since the list would be either too long or arbitrarily too short. The hope was that the categories used would be understood and, to ensure this, examples of books falling in a given category were included in parentheses. There was some confusion just the same: some respondents marked those examples rather than the main category. That is why there are more responses to this question (646) than the number of questionnaires tabulated (624). A final point: within the time constraint, GSS was unable to give findings for book and magazine preferences by source of mailing list; this can be done internally.

No matter which way one looks at the figures for books, one factor is clear: the readers have a strong preference for books classified as entertainment. Book classified as general information were in second place. From my discussions with division staff and with braille enthusiasts and opponents alike,

I have heard or read over and over again that, of course, braille is useful when it comes to books of information, reference, etc. It is argued that books of entertainment, however, are best handled in the recorded medium. Yet it is clear that the readers feel quite differently. If DBPH is to give proper attention to what readers say, it follows that, in braille book selection for press braille and for handcopied , we must give weight to this finding.

Of the 2,584 preferences marked (first, second, third, or fourth), 626 or 24 percent were votes for entertainment. Of the 886 first-choice preferences 304 or 35 percent were for entertainment. Moreover, the category in second place, general information, was a poor runner-up--155 or 17 percent (half the number for entertainment). Of the 659 second-choice votes, entertainment, at 136, was second to general information at 169; but when combining both first and second choices, entertainment was again in front--440 or 28 percent to general information's 324 or 21 percent (the total being 1,545 responses). Finally, considering each category by itself, one finds that 48 percent of the 626 votes for entertainment were first-choice preferences, with the runner-up again quite a bit behind--religious books

which received 39 percent of the first-choice votes. This position for religious books is not very significant since the number of responses, 77, is so much smaller than the 304 for entertainment. The total of the first four preferences is also much smaller--199 versus 626.

These statistical breakdowns do not yield the same rankings for all categories, as already hinted, but generally speaking reader preferences run in this order:

Entertainment
General Information
Hobbies
Education

A preference for reference works ranked fifth. It is perhaps surprising that vocational/professional books ranked so low (sixth place), and even more surprising that religious books fell into last place. It seems that selection of religious books may be in much greater volume than reader interest indicates. A factor to consider is that there are several organizations set up specifically to provide religious books to those interested.

As to type of braille magazine preferred, the result is not so one-sided nor is the spread so significant. Most often the first-place preference was for general interest magazines, while there was usually a tie for second place

between news and public affairs magazines and entertainment magazines, with special interest magazines most often in third place; vocational/professional magazines were almost always in last place. A second observation is that the various percentages for preferences were consistently in the low - to middle-20's for general interest, news and public affairs, and entertainment, with special interest and vocational/professional most often in the middle-to high-teen percentages. A final observation is that the news-and-public-affairs category ranked so high although very little in this category is provided through the Library of Congress program. It seems safe to assume, therefore, that readers like this kind of magazine and want more of it--a matter for consideration by the selection staff.

READER PROFILE

What are the characteristics of the readers from whom such useful information has been obtained? There were more women than men who responded, which is not surprising. The subsidiary percentages (considering source) were not too different. Sixty-one respondents left this question blank.

Rather more interesting conclusions can be drawn or at least speculations made about the responses on age groupings. First, it is significant the in the total group, the largest bulge, 38 percent is in the age group 40 to 64, with only 9 percent being 65 or older. Although there are very few young readers, there are 25 percent who are not yet 25 years old and 53 percent who are not yet 40.

In examining the individual mailing list sources, one finds the only under-15 group among BBR readers, which helps in making up the higher percentage on this list, 58 percent who are not yet 40. Monitor readers are very much like the total sample, except that there are none under 15, and the 25-39 age group is larger, 33 percent. Forum and New Outlook readers are an older population: the Forum with 55 percent between 40 and 64, and New Outlook with 54 percent in the identical age group. Forum readers also include a significantly larger number, 22 percent, who are 65 or older, while the New Outlook percentage in this grouping, 10 percent is more like the total sample. New Outlook readers include 28 percent between 25 and 39, while the corresponding percentage for the Forum is 18 percent. These differences are not so surprising when one considers that most New Outlook readers are still employed professionally

in work for the blind. (See below.)

The survey asked whether a reader is a full-time or a part-time student. Although the total percentage is 28 percent, only BBR readers and Monitor readers are close to this (31 and 26 percent, respectively). Forum and New Outlook readers include fewer students--14 percent and 10 percent respectively;--not surprising because of the older populations found among these two groups.

Forty-four percent of the total group are employed full-time or part-time but, surprisingly enough, 41 percent are not employed at all and 15 percent are retired. BBR and Monitor readers fall considerably below the average of those employed, Forum readers are close to it, but New Outlook readers are far above it--82 percent. BBR and Monitor readers are closer to and slightly higher than the average responding "not employed," and close to the average for retired readers. Forum readers include the highest percentage who are retired, 23 percent, and New Outlook readers the lowest, 7 percent.

Only 254 indicate they have full- or part-time employment, but 494 answered the question about type of employment in which now or formerly employed. Both by the

total and by the source, the category marked most often was "professional and technical." BBR and Monitor readers' percentages are below the total percentage of 34 percent for this category, while Forum readers are slightly above it and New Outlook readers way above at 72 percent, again not a startling finding. More surprising is that so many marked this category; the "housewife" category was marked second most frequently, although far behind "professional and technical." BBR responses approximated the total responses for this category, while Monitor and Forum responses were a little above and New Outlook responses were significantly below-3 percent suggesting that the 59 percent of New Outlook respondents who are women are mostly career women and/or are not married.

CONCLUSION

There is no attempt in this report to analyze the regional responses --a purposeful omission for the reasons that follow. First, the greatest value of the regional responses is as a check on the validity of the total responses and those by source of mailing list. Second, without further investigation and without some restructuring, it would be difficult and, quite likely, foolhardy to interpret differences

among regions. A more useful analysis would be possible if the geographic groupings were by regional library. This might be the better approach in a similar future survey, but in the present survey time was very limited.

A great many useful findings or indicators resulted from this survey. It is now up to the DBPH staff to take appropriate action or undertake further investigations in cooperation with participants in the national library network and with the readers themselves.